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ARTISTS' DIVISION
(GRADE SIX)

CHAPTER I

PREPARED BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF OF THE

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I

VARIATIONS SÉRIEUSES

D MINOR

FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY

Opus 54

Historically this set of Variations forms a connecting link between the classical treatment of Beethoven and the more impressionistic style of Schumann and Brahms. It would be difficult to think of any work for the piano which possesses more educational value to one with a fluent technic than this particular work. Although these Variations embrace many phases of piano-playing, it will be profitable first to study them from the viewpoint of touch. Substantially all the well-defined aspects of touch are here employed. Those found wanting are the *martellato*—the extreme dynamic limit—and those rapid light *legato* and *semi-legato* passages, which when they extend something like an octave and beyond are sometimes termed a "purling" style.

The Theme.—The Theme requires to be played with what may be termed the *sotto voce legato* touch; that is, a light finger weight in single tone *legato,* and in soft *chords* a light application of arm weight. To this can be added as much singing tone as the performer desires. The *sforzati* in Part II of the Theme demand a dropping of the arm, with the weight concentrated more on the outer side of the hand, so that the top tone will sound out more clearly.

Variation I.—The *sotto voce legato* should be applied here to the upper voice, and the inner voices should remain always *cantabile.* The left-hand part must be *half-length touch;* that is, purely as an accompanying voice, though in the final measures of Part II the *legato* style appears. The *sforzati* in the right-hand part should be brought out sufficiently to enable the melody tones on which they stand to sound clearly until the tone resolves. Here, as elsewhere, a proper appreciation of the harmonic function of the tone or chord is essential to a proper interpretation. The inner voices are to be played *sotto voce.* The part in *sixteenth* notes creates a slight mood of activity which the Theme did not have, but this should not be at all pronounced. The same quiet mood which characterized the Theme should continue through the first Variation. The effect of the *sixteenth* notes is that of a quiet commentary on the Theme, while the animated effect which the Variation undoubtedly has should appear to be the result of the delicate *staccato* Octaves in the left-hand part, rather than the motion in the right hand. In Part II the *sforzati* Octaves in the left-hand part should be clear but not harsh. Play the two final chords gracefully, in a way that will recall the ending of the Theme.

Variation II.—The upper voice needs the same style of touch as in the *Theme.* The remaining voices should be played *mezza voce legato;* that is, arm weight slightly drawn upon for the ornamental material. These figures in Triplets should suggest the murmuring of a peaceful mountain brook, not the rushing of a torrent.

This Variation is the complement of the second. It will be useful to think of these two Variations as the two units of a pair; both of them are but slightly elaborated versions of the Theme itself, and in neither of them does the melody of the Theme undergo any striking changes. As will be shown in other examples to appear in this Grade, this is the way in which the opening variations in the Variation form are usually treated. The composer does not begin to depart from the Theme very much until at least one, and often two or three variations, have fully established the Theme by corroborating it, thus getting it well understood by the listener, so that he will the more easily remember the material under process of development, and so be able to follow the more radical changes which the Theme will undergo in later variations.

Variation III.—This Variation is a dialogue between the right and left hands. Its character is for the most part *staccato.* The Pedal should be used with much discretion, else the light, detached style, coming as a contrast after two Variations played *legato,* will be lost. The Variation may begin gracefully and end dramatically.

The student should observe that another important feature of the Variation form is that each Variation has its own characteristic figure which the composer moulds to the requirements of the Theme. Thus, a rhythmical figure of four six-

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teenth notes was the *motive* adopted in Variation I. In Variation II the *motive* was a double Triplet figure. The characteristic figure of Variation III is the group of three *staccato sixteenth* notes, ascending, and then dropping to a lower tone. This *motive* should be made evident, but not obtrusive.

VARIATION IV.—This Variation is *staccato* throughout, a treatment suggested by the preceding Variation. The dialogue character continues, but of an entirely different character from that in Variation III, changed now into a kind of mockery. The *crescendo* indications should be carefully observed, and as the *fortissimo* climax is reached the length of the tones must be slightly broadened, although the Variation should end in the same *tempo* with which it began.

VARIATION V.—While passing from one hand to the other the material must be kept even in tonal strength by the *inter-hand legato* touch. In certain places in this Variation this touch must be modied to *non-legato* as well as to *tenuto legato*. This Variation is in a more singing style than the two preceding, but yet is restless and agitated. The latter quality can best be obtained by careful playing of the syncopations.

VARIATION VI.—In greater part, this Variation calls for the *half-length legato* touch, but for the special accents the *sforzando* must be used. It may be helpful to think of this Variation as if orchestrated—a dialogue between the string and wood-wind choirs. This means that entirely different kinds of touch should be employed for the two opposing groups. The Variations may end in a grandiose, heroic style. In the *arpeggio* in the final measure the last note [*D*] may be played with the left hand.

VARIATION VII.—The characteristic *motive* of this Variation is the *sixteenth* and *eighth* note figure at the beginning. This should be played with a trumpet-like tone, but not *pesante*. Notice that the *arpeggio* which follows is developed from the *arpeggio* at the end of Variation VI. The arpeggio figures are played brilliantly, but with a different kind of touch from the chord motive.

VARIATION VIII.—This Variation is to be played throughout with an air of mystery. Use the *una corda* pedal and preserve the *sotto voce* character, which is intensified by the contrasting *sforzati*. The *staccato* notes in the left-hand part should be very short and precise.

VARIATION IX.—It is quite evident that this Variation is a continuation of the spirit of the preceding one. The mysterious threats of Variation VIII are here more outspoken, rising at the end to a brilliant and dramatic climax. Play the *sforzati* with more boldness.

VARIATION X.—In the preceding six Variations the homophonic element predominated. Here the polyphonic style is decidedly in evidence, although the form is quite free. It is a kind of four-voiced Invention. A *cantabile* style should be maintained throughout, and the first note of the Theme, as it appears in the various voices, should be emphasized in such a way as to impart to the Theme a new significance, as though its real, inner meaning had not become evident until in this Variation.

VARIATION XI.—The *cantabile* style continues in this Variation, though in quite different surroundings. The texture is very characteristic of Mendelssohn, and reminds one of several of the Songs without Words.

VARIATION XII.—In this Variation the virtuoso style comes out in a more obvious manner than in preceding Variations. The stormy mood should increase in intensity, reaching a triumphal climax at the end. Observe the admonition "*tempo di tema,*" and do not play this Variation too fast.

VARIATION XIII.—This Variation has a much more direct reference to the Theme than any of the Variations immediately preceding. It is as though the composer were refreshing the memory of the listener by presenting the original matter in a way that will recall the beginning, before taking up the final and more intricate Variations.

The parts for both hands should be studied separately until the different styles represented by the three voices are under full control and their relations well understood. The lower voice of the left-hand part is played *quasi pizzicato*. The *thirty-second* notes in the right hand are *staccato* throughout, but not a dry, perfunctory kind of *staccato*. It has more the character of an independent contrapuntal part than of a mere accompanying voice.

VARIATION XIV.—Up to this point every Variation has been in the Key of *D minor*. After so many in the same Key, this Variation in *D major* comes as a relief. It is a kind of song of gratitude after the intense, agitated variations before it. The player may put all the emotion into this Variation that he pleases—in fact this is one of the few places in which a bit of sentimentality might not be out of place.

VARIATIONS XV, XVI, XVII.—These three Variations can most conveniently be considered

together, as they represent the progressive development of a single mood. XV begins with a kind of subdued restlessness which recalls Variation V, but this time the syncopation is in the right-hand part. In XVI the *tempo* is increased and the mood is more intense; this Variation passes directly into the last of the set, the most difficult and dramatic of all. At the twenty-fifth measure of this Variation observe that the nature of the technical figures requires the phrasing to be in groups of two measures. Fourteen measures before the final *Presto* a long Dominant Organpoint ushers in the last clearly recognizable presentation of the Theme. This passage should not be dragged; it is still affected by the *agitato* mood, and leads into the wild *Presto* with which the composition closes. This Finale should be played almost madly. It presents no new technical features, but the student must be careful that the syncopation is clearly understood, and not get so excited that there is doubt anywhere as to which hand has the metrical accent and which the syncopation. The last three chords should have the effect of bringing the listener back into the mood of the beginning.

In some respects it is justifiable to look at this series of variations as a sort of summary of piano technic of the period of the composer. A study of the different variations shows their widely contrasting character, and the range of technical mastery required. The theme itself has a broadly lyric quality, appealingly *minor* in mood, and this atmosphere, if one may use the word, is gradually transformed, from one variation to the next, and the work as a whole ends with three variations which draw exactingly upon the technical equipment of the artist.

In summarizing let us take a rapid survey of the work. No. 1 is a very quiet, unobtrusive *legato*, especially in the accompaniment, a quality which is also apparent in No. 2. In both of these this is to be an almost shadowy background in which the hearer catches the general effect but not the individual tones. Nos. 3 and 4 introduce *staccato* execution, the former having an effective accompanying figure in octaves. No. 5 returns to *legato* again but with syncopation between the hands which must not destroy the smooth connection. In No. 6 we have a partial *legato* effect which is all that can be secured owing to the quick leaps of an octave in the right hand. A suggestive partial climax is reached in No. 7, which requires a martial, brilliant execution. Psychologically, that is allowing for natural reaction of mood after even a half-climax. Nos. 8 and 9 are quiet and *staccato* in character. In No. 10 the composer forsakes his own period and goes back to that of his great artistic ancestor, Bach. The polyphonic quality is marked in Nos. 10 and 11. With No. 12 we reach a virtuoso style strongly triumphal in character and offering to the player a delightful opportunity to put himself into the work. No. 13, with its sharp, short *pizzicato* effects in rapidly moving notes recalls the clavichord tone of the older music. In No. 14 we have again a little breathing spell, as it were, in which a songlike presentation of the theme is given but in a harmonic style much broader than at first. In Nos. 15, 16, 17, we have the closing of the work with a powerful dramatic climax in which the skilled player can revel.

As previously suggested, these variations are an epitome of the styles of playing demanded by the classical repertoire, and are to be mastered by the student.

* * *

Music may be termed the universal language of mankind, by which human feelings are made equally intelligible to all; while on the other hand, it offers the different nations the most varied dialects, according to the mode of expression suitable to the character of each nation.—*Liszt.*

* * *

Whatever the relations of music, it will never cease to be the noblest and purest of arts. It is in the nature of music to bring before us, with absolute truth and reality, what other arts can only imply. Its inherent solemnity makes it so chaste and wonderful, that it ennobles whatever comes in contact with it.—*Wagner.*

MEMORANDA

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VARIATIONS SERIEUSES

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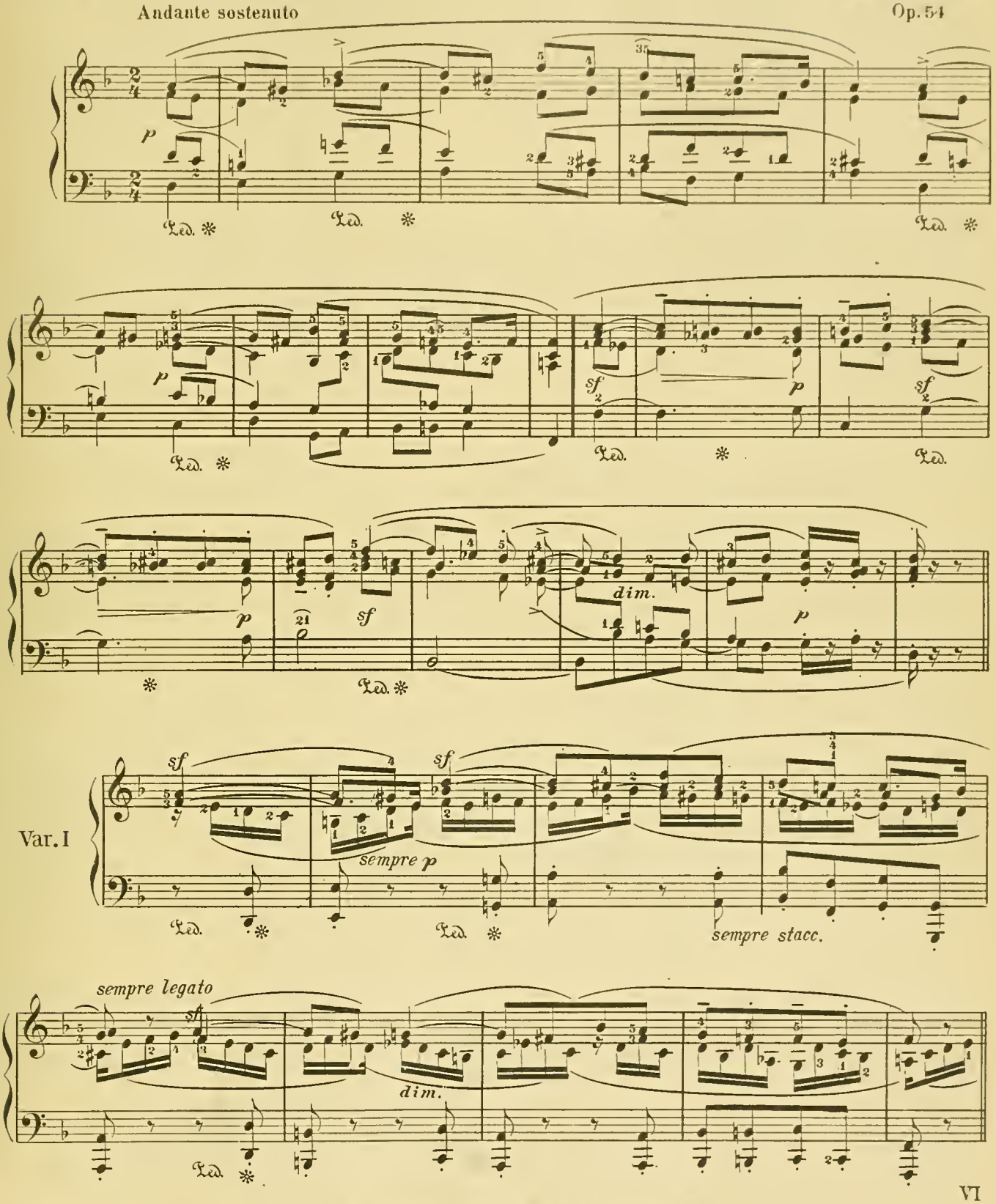
F. MENDELSSOHN
Op. 54

Andante sostenuto



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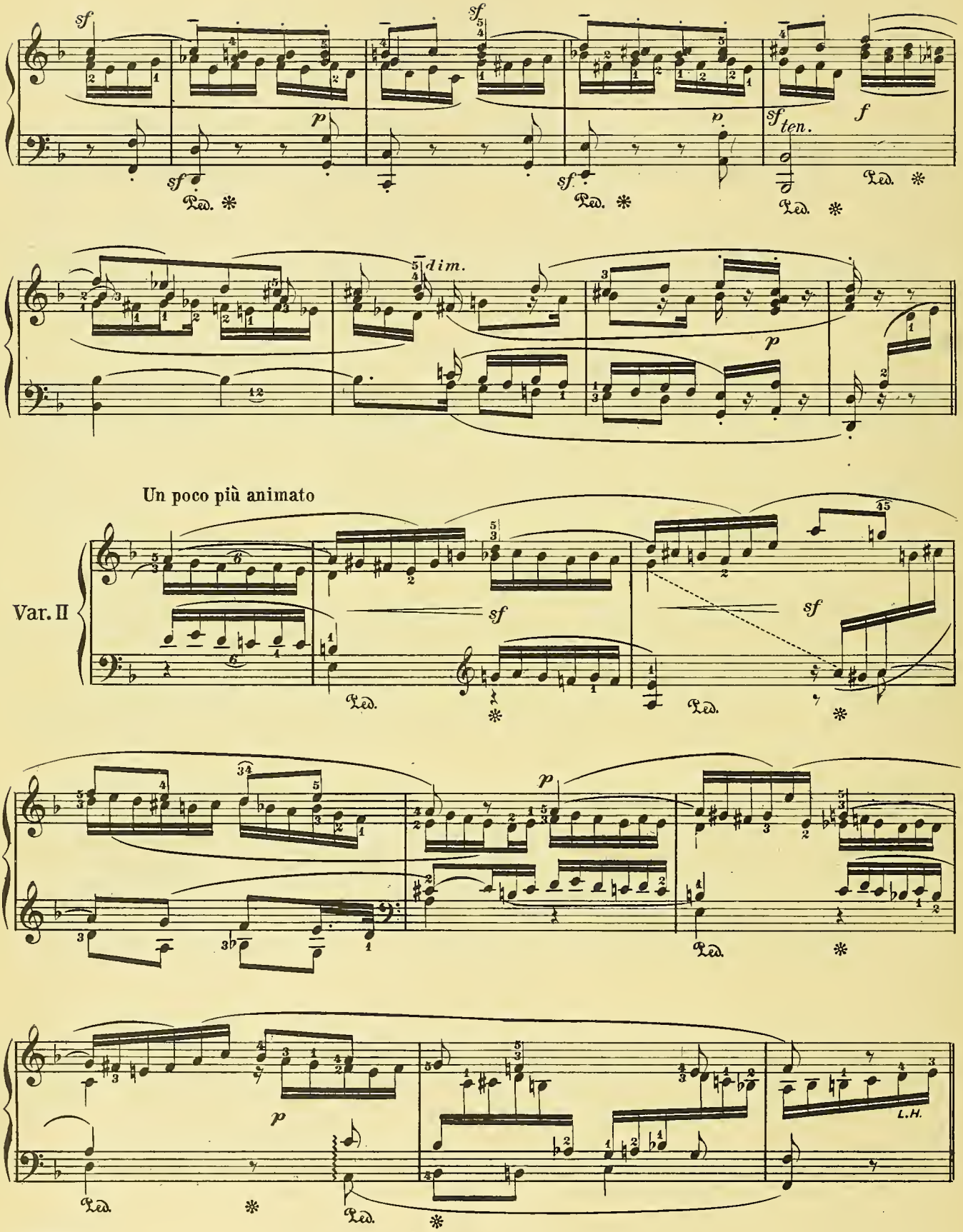
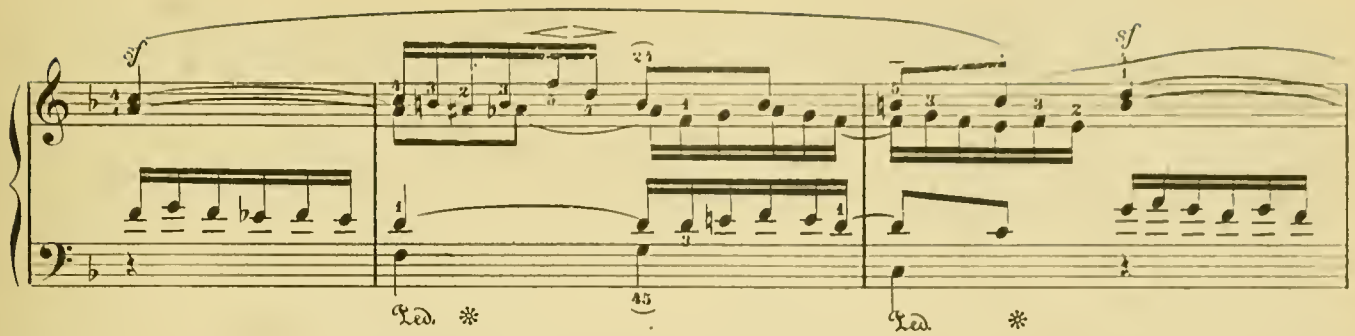
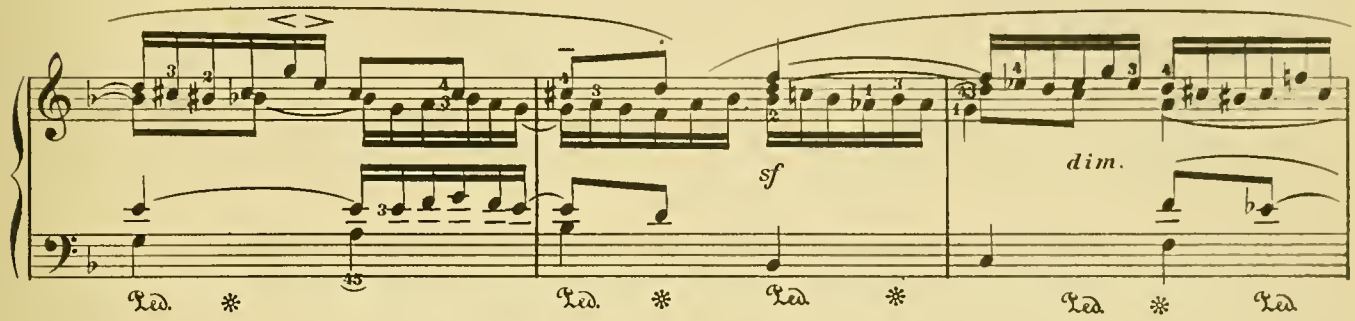
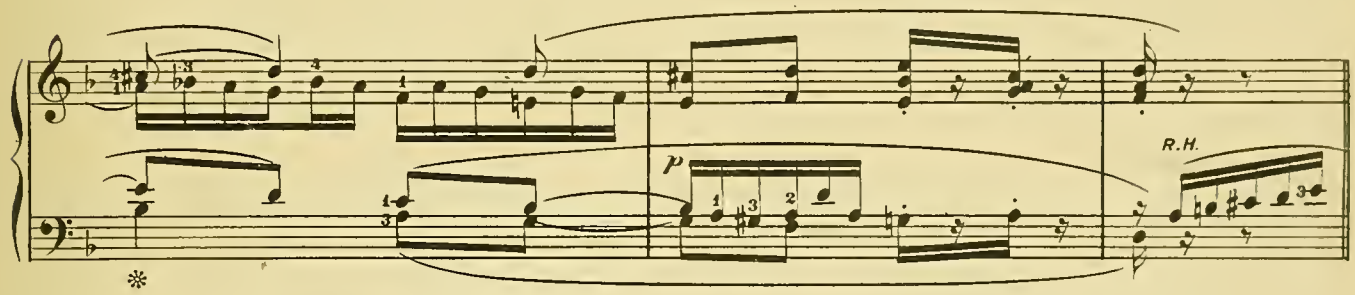

sf
p
sf
p
sf
ten.
f
Ped. *
dim.
p
Un poco più animato
Var. II
sf
sf
p
p
L.H.

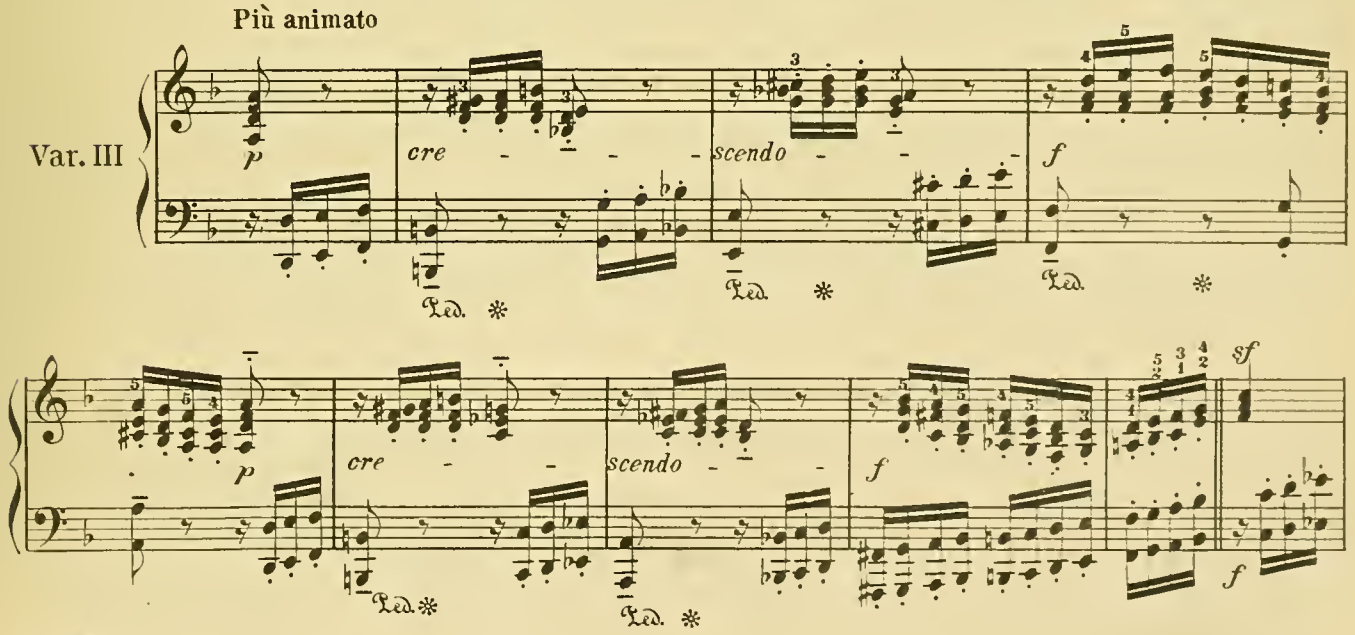


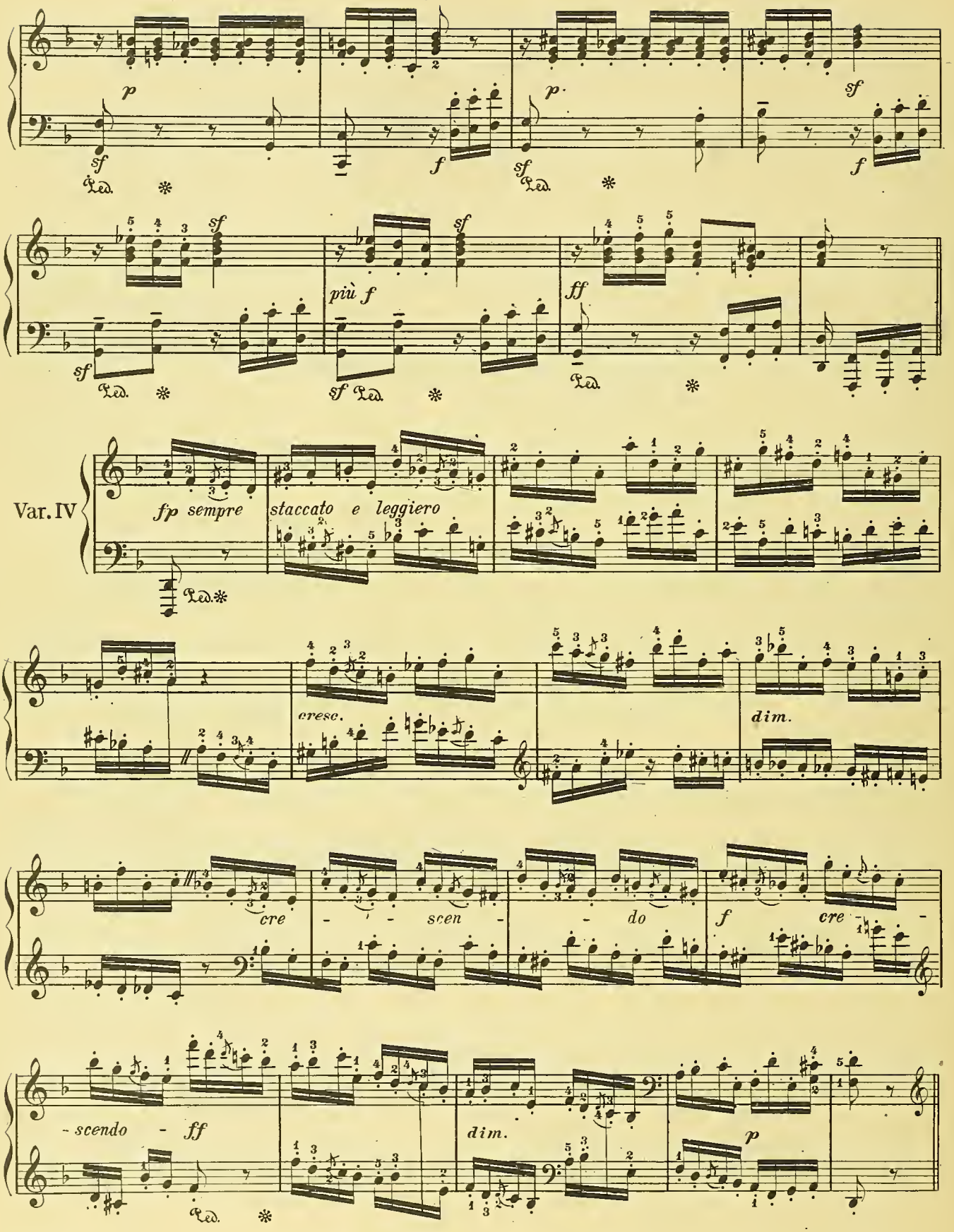


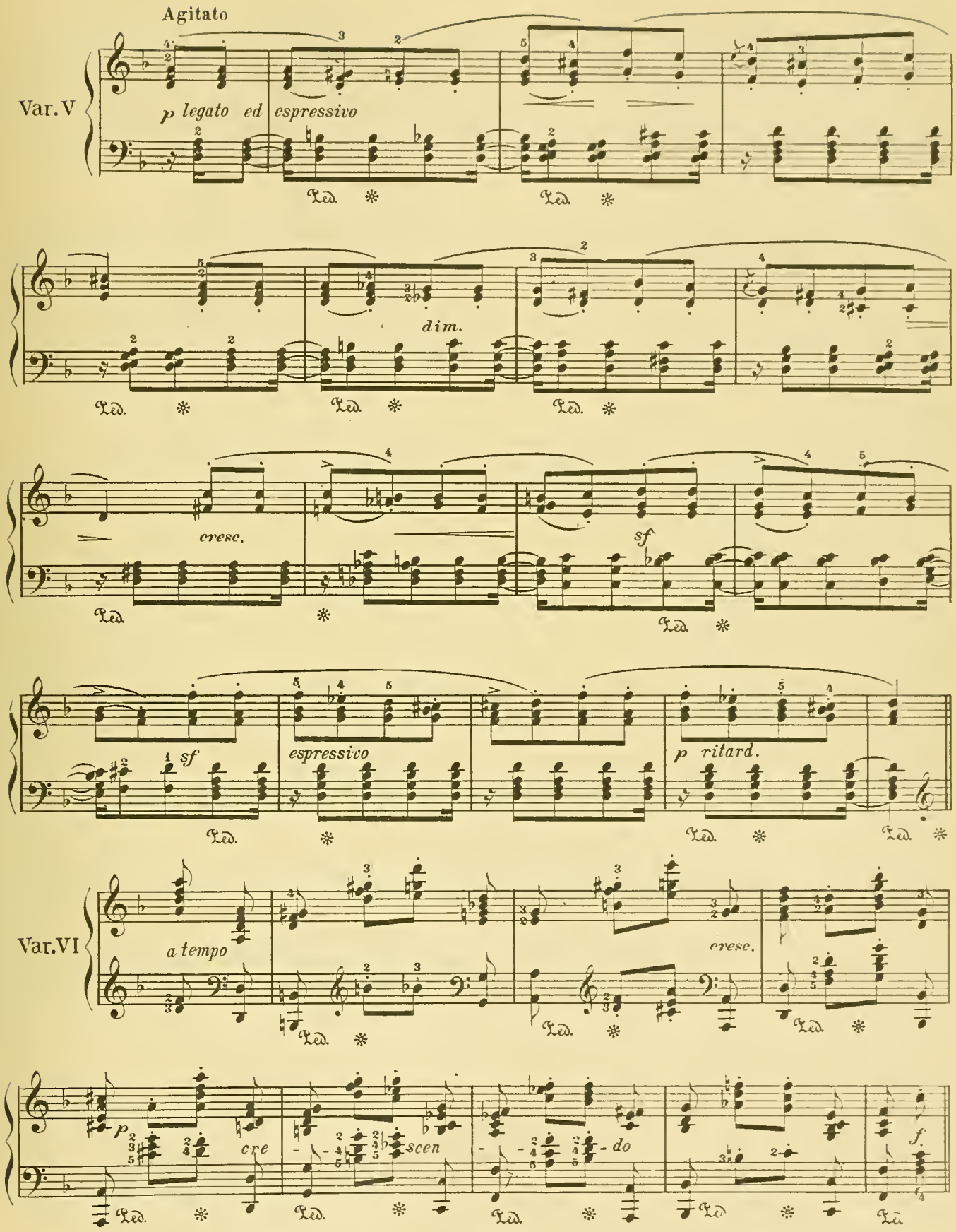


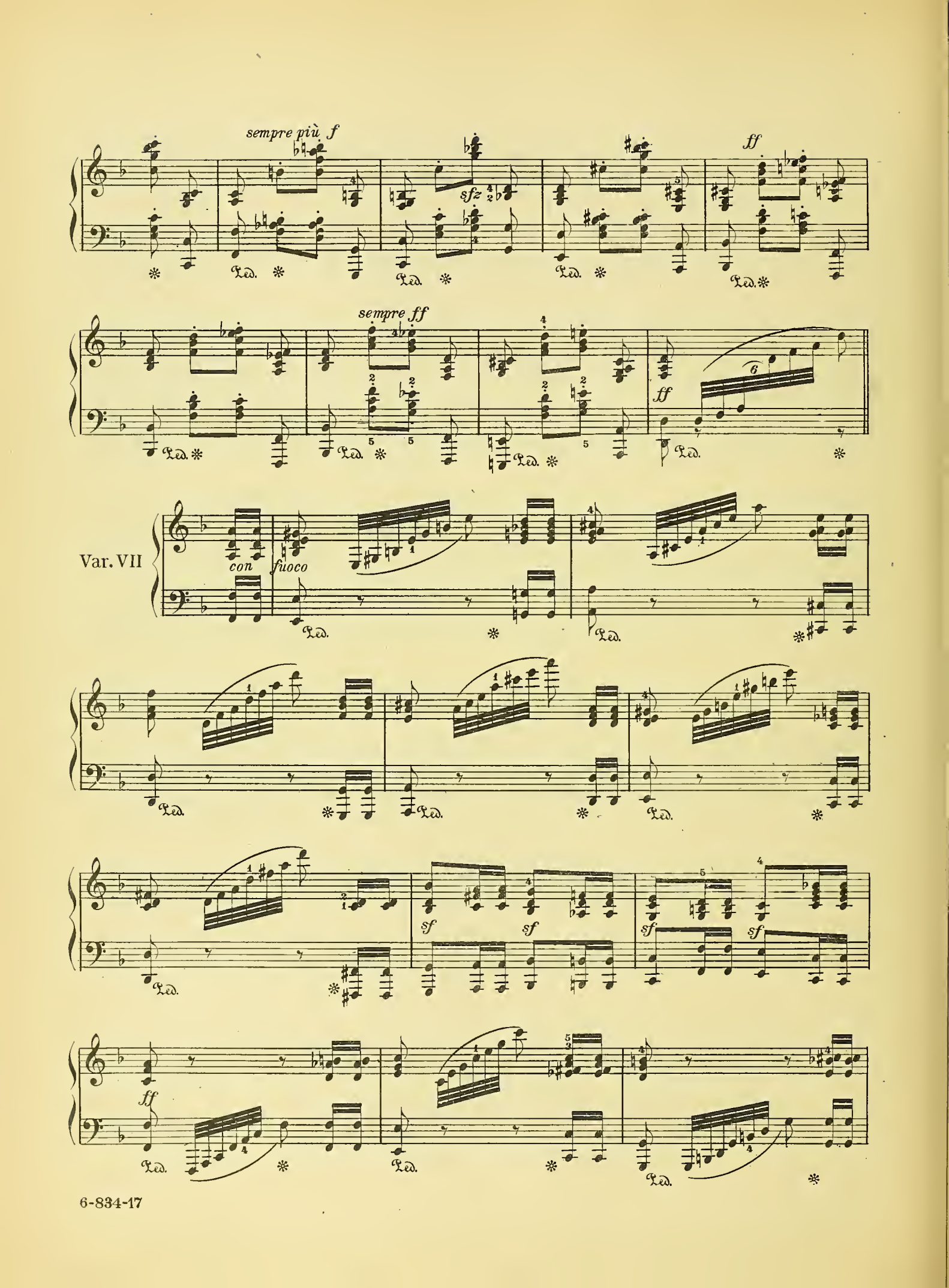
Più animato

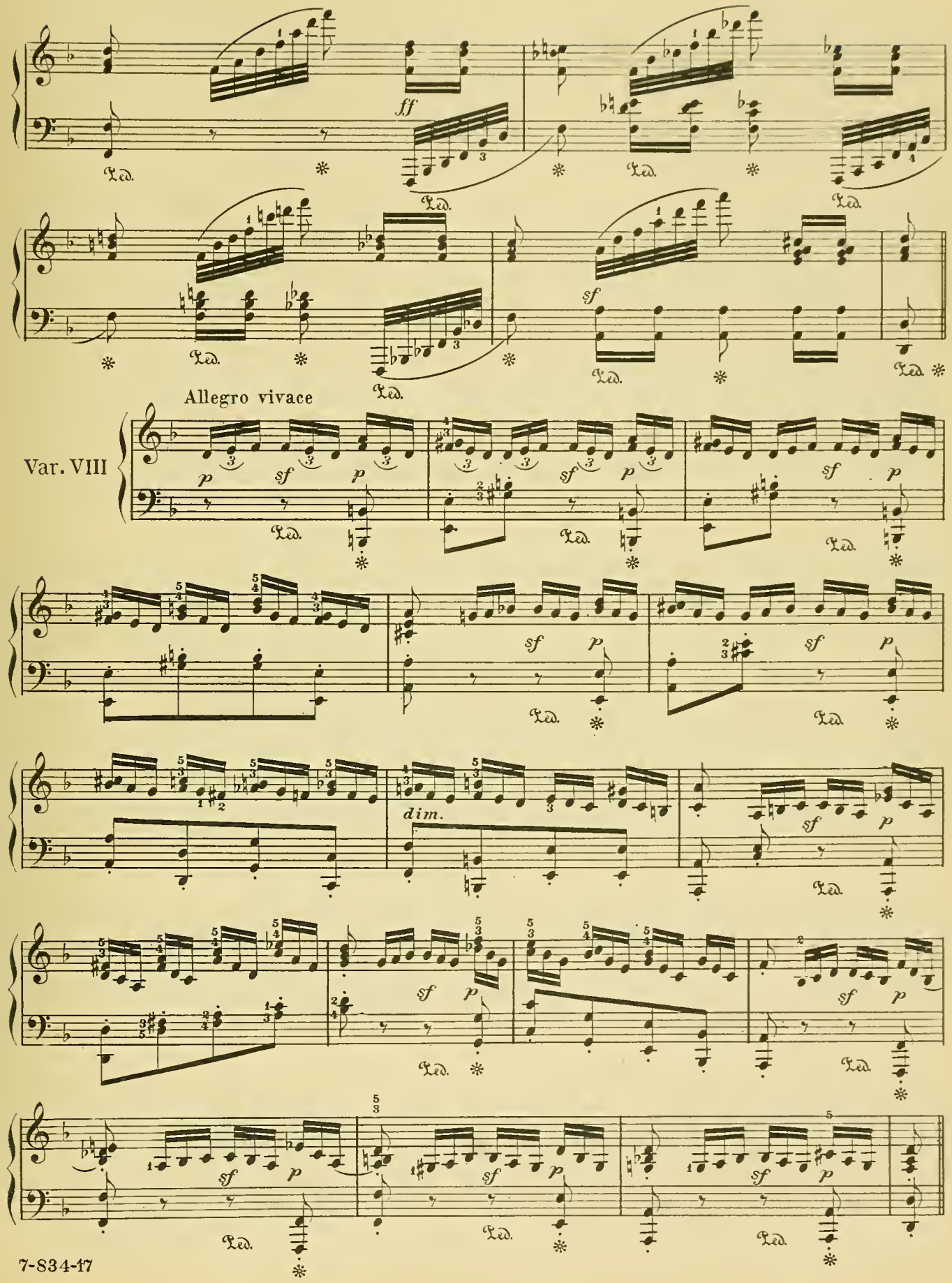
Var. III

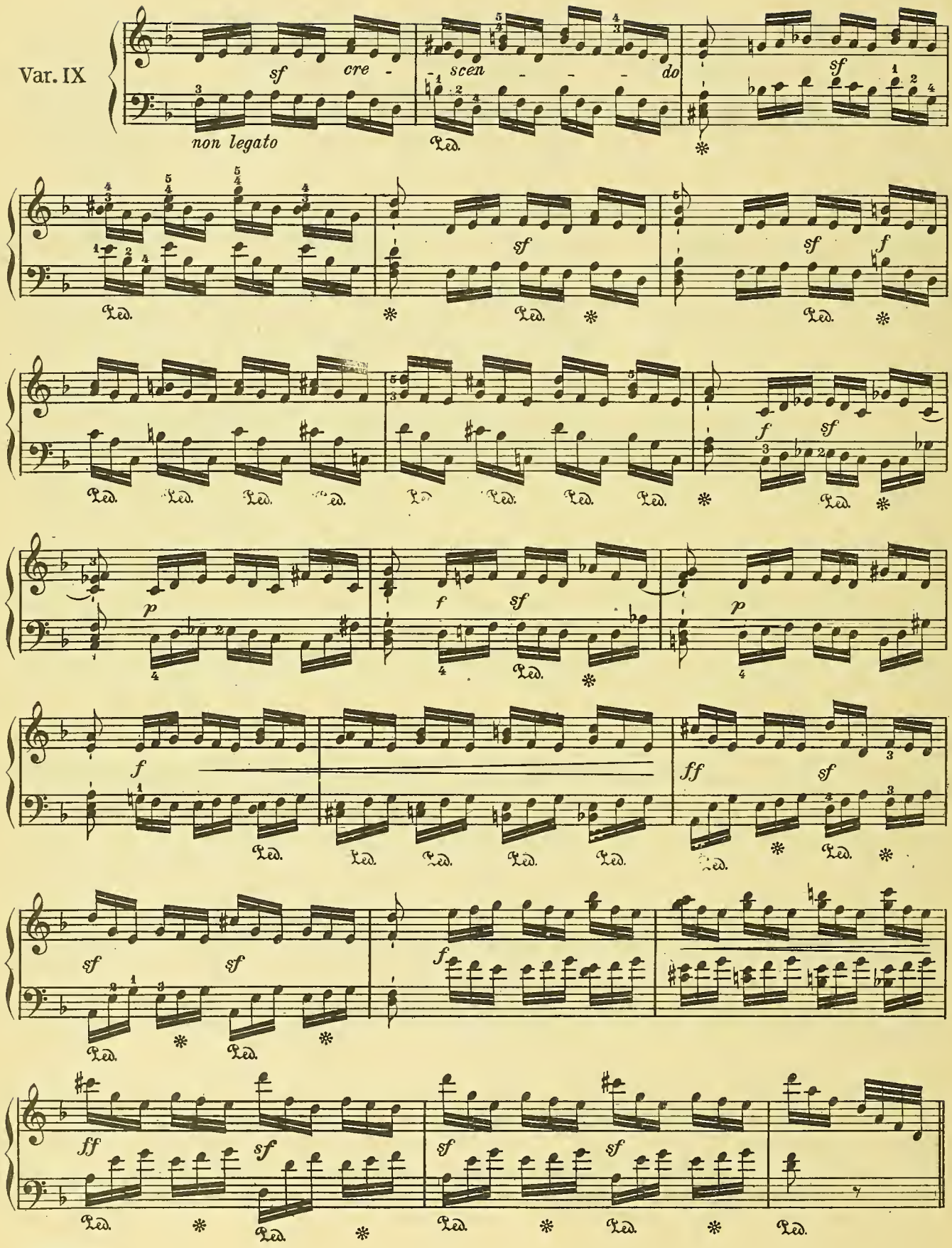



p
sf
f
p
sf
f
sf
più f
sf
ff
Var. IV
fp sempre
staccato e leggiero
cresc.
dim.
cre - scen - do
f
cre - scendo - ff
dim.
p


Agitato
Var. V
p legato ed espressivo
dim.
cresc.
sf
espressivo
p ritard.
Var. VI
a tempo
cresc.
p
cre
scen
do
f


sempre più f
sfz
ff
sempre ff
ff
Var. VII
con fuoco
sf
sf
sf
sf
ff


ff
sf
Allegro vivace
Var. VIII
p
sf
dim.


Var. IX
sf
cre -
scen - - - do
non legato
sf
sf
sf
f
f
sf
p
f
sf
p
f
ff
sf
sf
sf
f
ff
sf
sf
sf

Moderato

Var. X

mf *p*

Ped. ✻

cre - - - scendo - - - p

Ped. ✻ Ped. ✻

cresc. *dim.* *p*

Ped. ✻

Var. XI

cantabile *pp*

Ped. ✻Ped. ✻Ped. ✻ *simile*

cre

- scen - - - do *p* *cre - - - scen - - -*

- - - do e ri - tar - - dan - do

sf *f*

Ped. ✻

Tempo di Tema

Var. XII

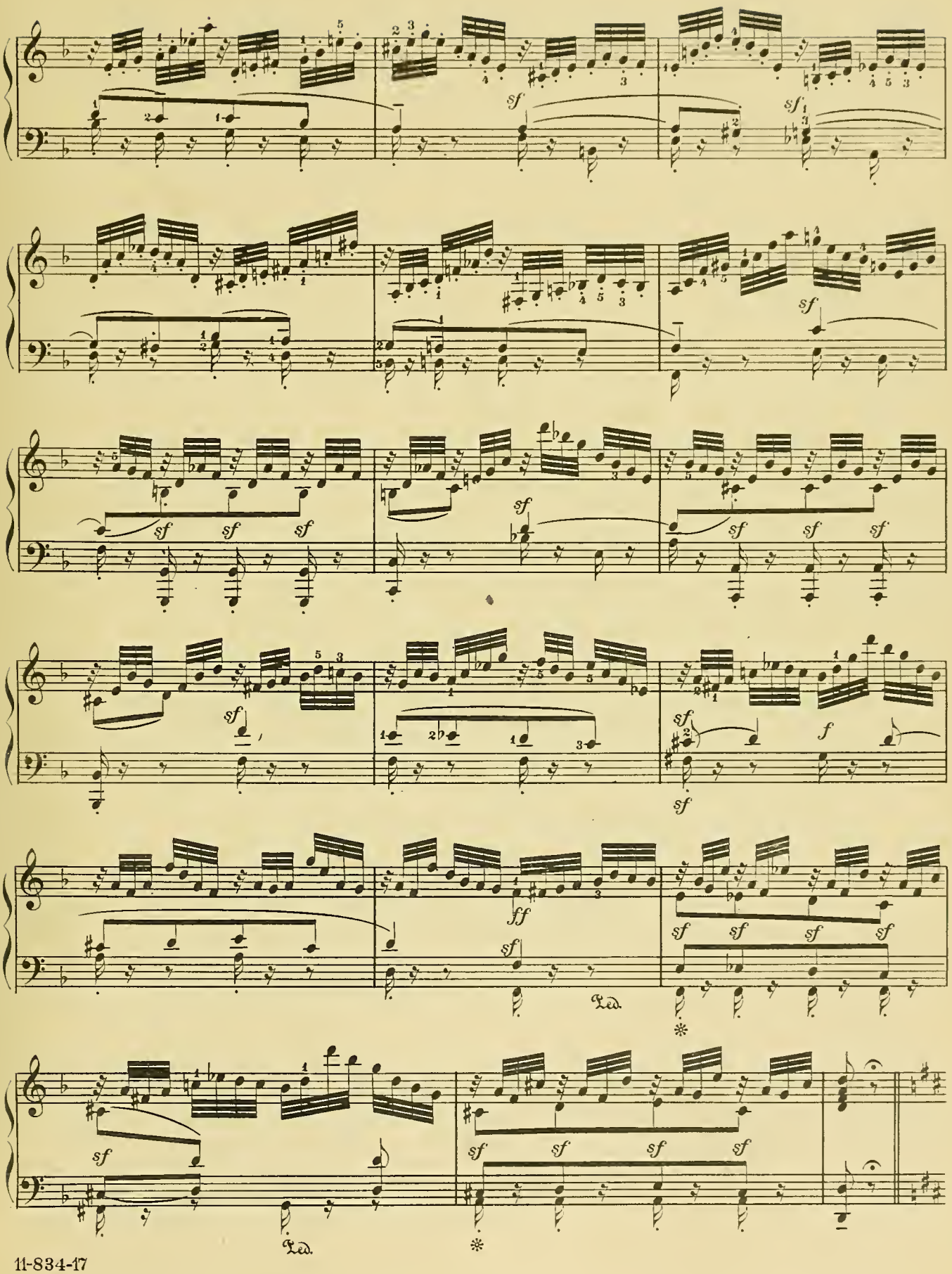
sempre f

cresc.

Var. XIII

sempre assai leggiero

sostenuto il tema


sf
sf
sf
sf
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sf
sf
ff
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
Ped.
Ped.

Adagio

Var. XIV

mf

p

cresc.

f

dim.

p

ritard.

Var. XV

poco a poco più agitato

sempre pp

cresc.

cresc.

sf

dimin.

Allegro vivace

Var. XVI

p *con bravura* *cresc.*

f *p*

cresc. *sf*

sf *sf* *sf*

sf *ff*

p

Var. XVII

cresc.

f

sf

p

cresc.

f

sf

ff

sf

ff

ff

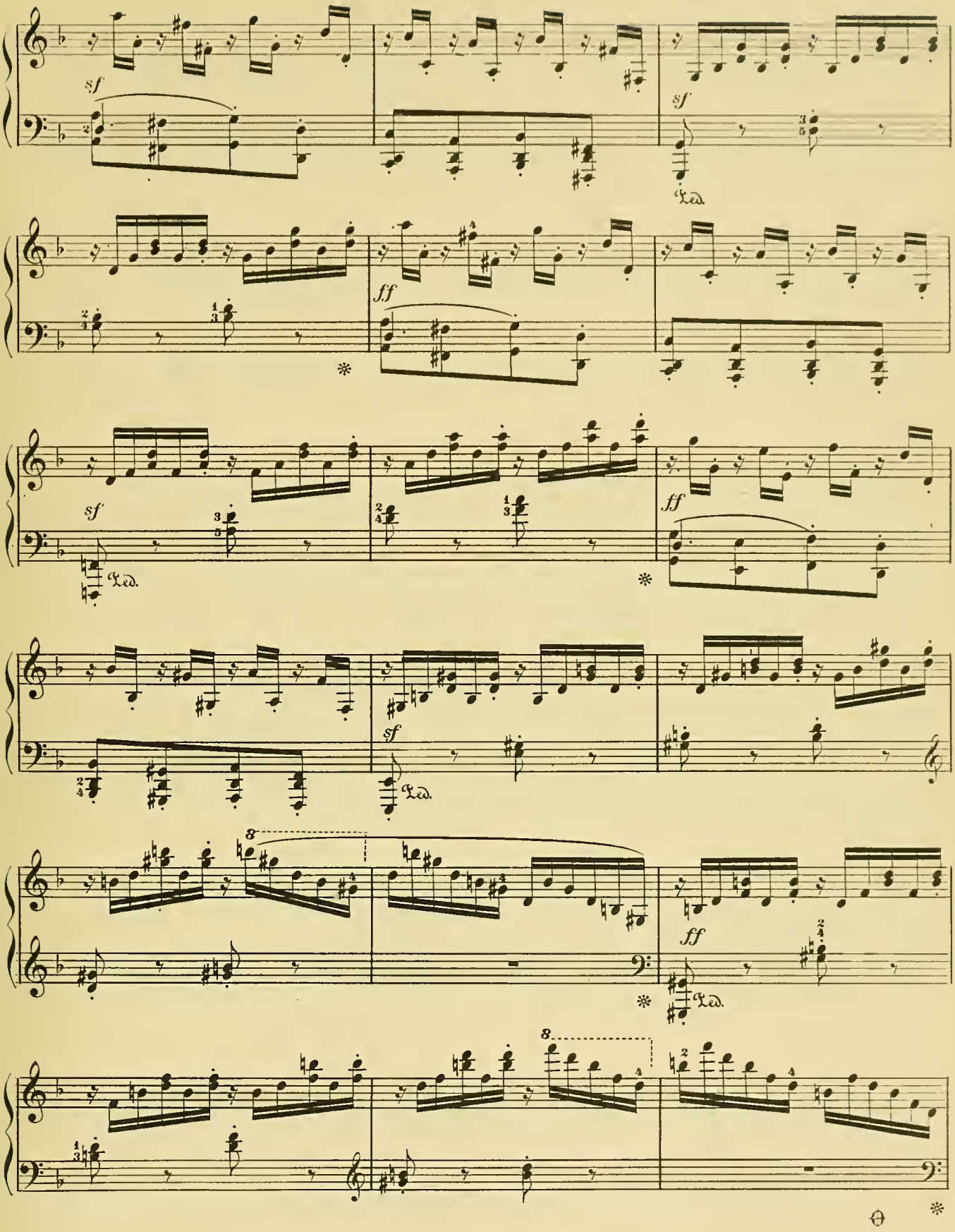
ff

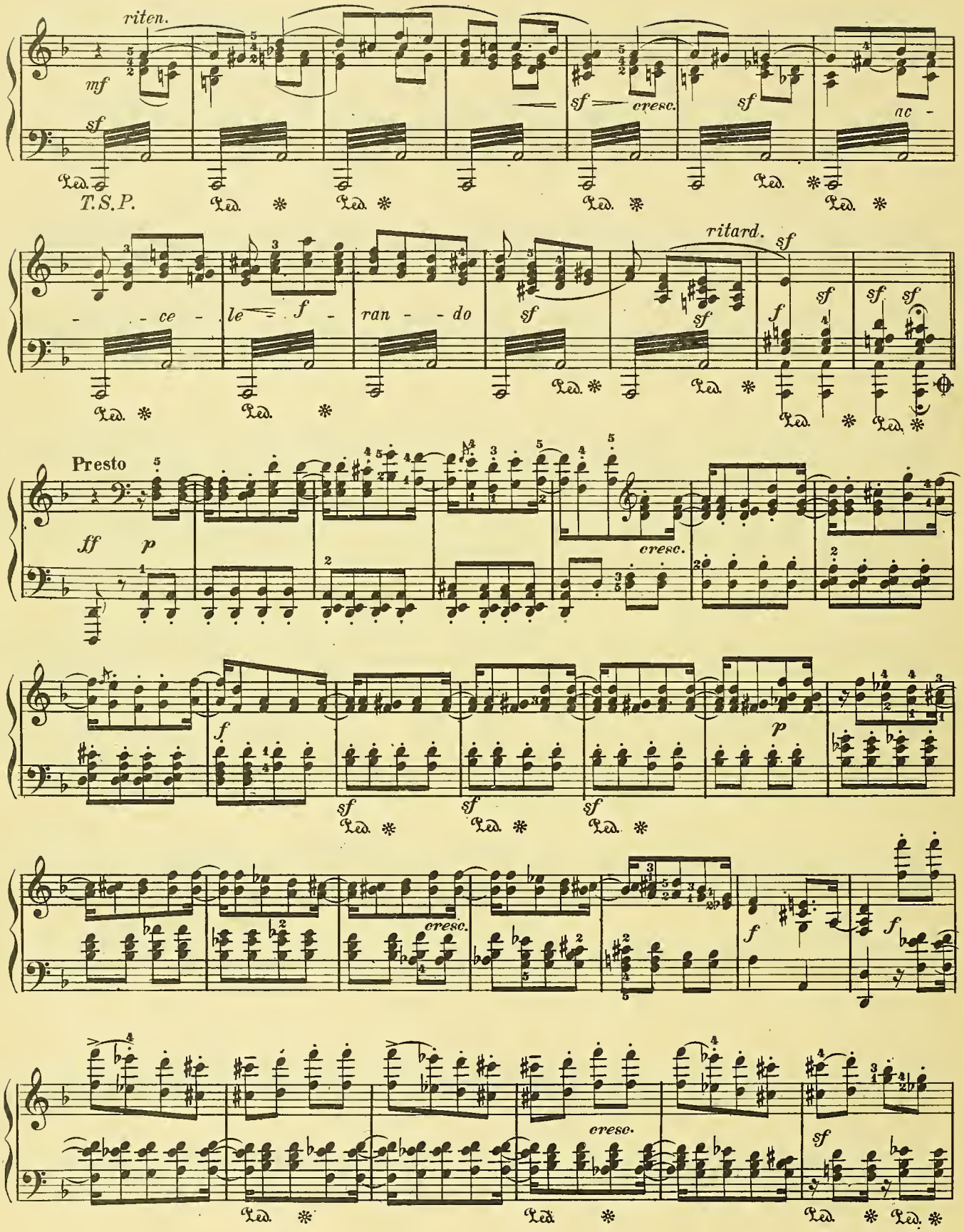
ff

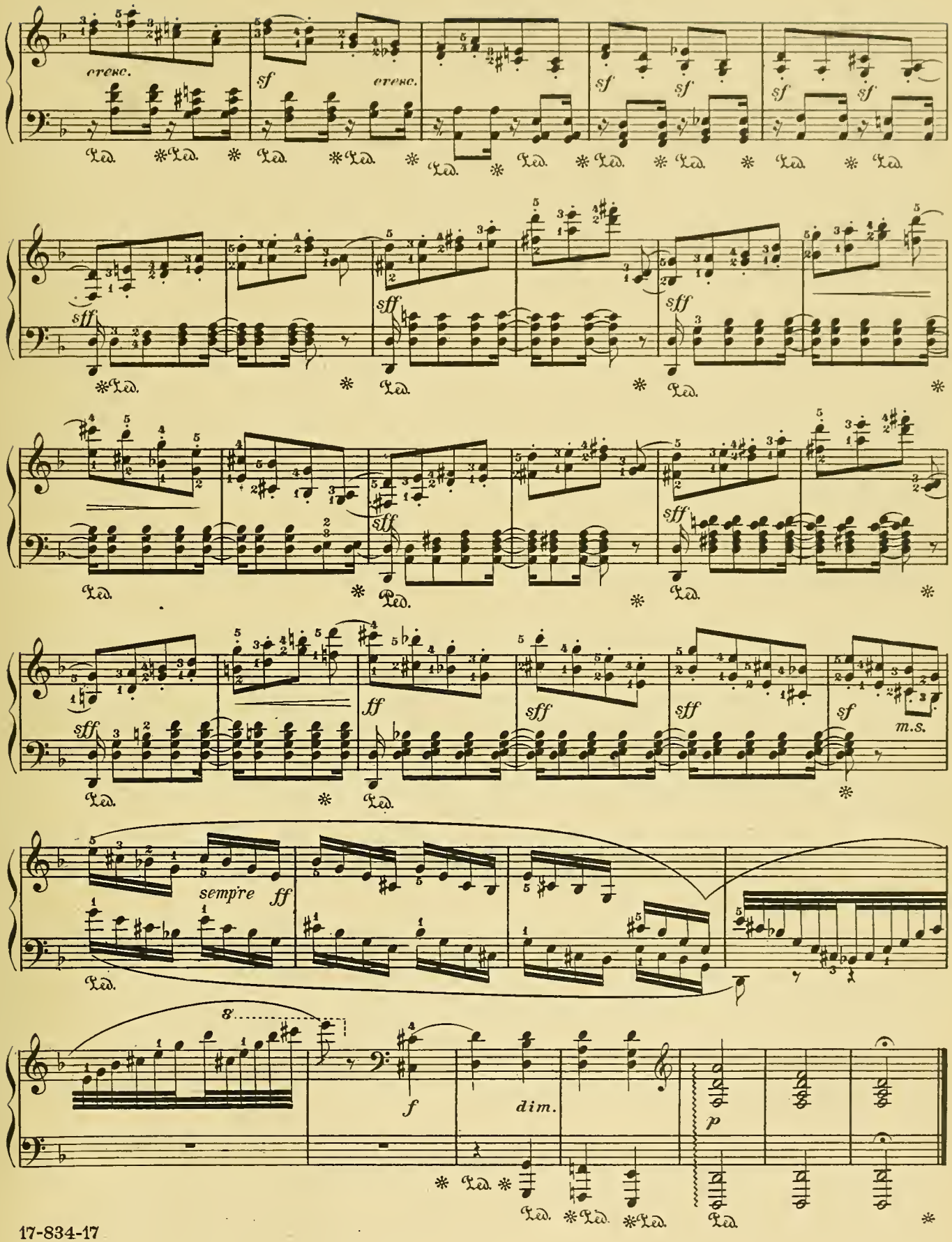
ff

Ped.

T. S. P.


sf
sf
ff
sf
ff
sf
ff
8
ff
8


riten.
mf
sf
cresc.
ac -
T.S.P.
- - ce - le - f - ran - - do
ritard.
Presto
ff
p
cresc.
f
p
cresc.
cresc.
sf


cresc.
sf
cresc.
sf
sf
sf
sf
sff
sff
sff
sff
sff
sff
sff
sff
sff
ff
sff
sff
sf
m.s.
sempre ff
8
f
dim.
p

MEMORANDA

MEMORANDA

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CHAPTER EXAMINATION

1. What is the historical significance of this work?

2. Why do composers usually leave a theme practically unchanged in the first two or three variations?

3. What are some of the characteristic features of the first three variations?

4. What is meant by inter-hand *legato* touch?

5. What orchestral color is suggested by Variation VI?

6. Which element predominated in the first six variations, homophonic or polyphonic?

7. Which is the principal style in Variation X?

8. Why should Variations XV to XVII be considered together?

9. Give a technical summary of the Variations.

10. What are the years of Mendelssohn's birth and death?

Student Percentage

Examined by Date

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